全球智慧教育合作联盟
Global Smart Education Network

Shaping AI or Being Shaped by It?
Our Work, Our Leadership, and the Road Ahead

Fireside Chat Report

I. Introduction

The rapid evolution of generative AI is accelerating profound changes in education. While AI holds considerable promise for expanding access, enhancing learning and improving system efficiency, emerging evidence highlights serious risks that require immediate attention. The digital divide continues to widen, with 2.6 billion people still offline, and 44 per cent of AI systems exhibit gender bias, reflecting training data that insufficiently represents diverse linguistic and cultural communities. These developments raise fundamental concerns about whether AI will advance equity and inclusion, or reinforce existing social and educational disparities.

In this context, educational leaders must ensure that AI-enabled transformation remains human-centred, ethically grounded and globally inclusive. Lessons from earlier technological shifts, such as the global spread of mobile technologies, demonstrate that sustainable change occurs only when stakeholders meaningfully participate in the 'domestication' of new tools. As AI reshapes learning, work and social interaction, institutions face a pressing responsibility to equip all learners with the capacity not only to use AI, but also to understand and shape it.

To explore these issues, the **Global Smart Education Network (GSENet)** hosted a Fireside Chat titled *"Shaping AI or Being Shaped by It? Our Work, Our Leadership, and the Road Ahead"* on 12th November, as part of *the 30th World Conference of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE)* . The session was moderated by Prof. Asha Singh Kanwar, Chair of the Governing Board of the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (UNESCO IITE) and Chair Professor at the Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University. Panelists included Dr. Mansoor Alawar, Chancellor of Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University, United Arab Emirates; Mr. Maxim Jean-Louis, President and CEO of Contact North I Contact Nord, Canada; Ms. Torunn Gjelsvik, Secretary General of ICDE; and Prof. Huang Ronghuai, Co-Dean of the Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University and UNESCO Chair on AI in Education.

In the opening remarks, Prof. Asha Singh Kanwar expressed her appreciation to all GSENet partners for their support and active participation in the Fireside Chat. She reflected on the major questions confronting us: *Are we shaping AI, or is AI shaping us? Are we exacerbating existing inequalities in our society or are we using AI to create a fairer future for all?*

As Manuel Castells notably said, *'Technology is neither good, nor bad, nor is it neutral. It is a force.'* Technology cannot be considered neutral because it actively shapes and is shaped by social relations, networks and power flows. How do leaders ensure that the futures we build with AI are not only technologically advanced — but are also socially just, and globally equitable?

What can we learn from the mobile revolution of 20 years ago? The adoption of mobile phones even in the remotest regions changed financial systems and today, illiterate farmers in the farmers market in Beijing are using QR codes to receive payments. How did this technology adoption become so ubiquitous? The stakeholders had a major role in 'domesticating' the technology so that it became a win-win framework for both the producers of the technology and the users.

What role do stakeholders have in shaping AI? Who are the stakeholders? There are those who will lose their jobs, there are others whose languages and cultures do not form part of the data that LLMs are trained on and there are others who will benefit from the opportunities that AI can provide, and this includes the big technology companies. How can our educational institutions ensure that every student has access to AI and are empowered to 'domesticate' the technology so that they can control it rather than be controlled by it?

(12th November, Wellington, New Zealand)

1. Round One: Our Work

Mr. Maxim Jean-Louis, President and Chief Executive Officer, Contact North I Contact Nord, Canada

When GenAI emerged as a disruptive force, how did you and Contact North I Contact Nord first respond? Was it seen as a risk or an opportunity or both? What impact did this have on policy?

Key message: *"Do not let AI turn learners into prompts."*

Maxim emphasized that AI adoption must safeguard learner agency rather than reduce students to mere prompt-generators. In response to the emergence of GenAI, Contact North I Contact Nord adopted a proactive and exploratory strategy, beginning with the development of its own institutionally governed chatbot. This work was guided by three core principles: ensuring simplicity of use, maintaining strict privacy and confidentiality, and providing free public access. Maxim stressed that no AI tool should ever be released in beta form; instead, systems must be fully functional before they reach learners to avoid eroding trust or deepening inequities. Throughout his remarks, he highlighted the importance of fostering a strong sense of belonging and trust, reiterating that AI must never diminish the identity or autonomy of learners. This central caution of protecting the human dimension of learning shaped the session's broader commitment to human-centred innovation.

Prof. Mansoor Alawar, Chancellor, Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU), United Arab Emirates

The first 90 days of GenAI, what did that look like in practice for HBMSU—what did the faculty actually do, what changed for learners, and which governance model made it go from safe to scale? What did you stop doing, and what would you do differently now?

Key message: *Balance innovation and safeguards through clarity, simplicity, and shared responsibility.*

Dr. Mansoor Alawar explained that HBMSU's approach to AI adoption was anchored in three foundational priorities: preserving academic integrity, giving faculty time back, and protecting equity. Rather than imposing a ban on AI, the university issued a concise one-page guideline specifying when AI is permitted, how it must be disclosed, and what constitutes responsible use. This is accompanied by a simple requirement embedded in every course: *"If you use AI, state where and how."*

Implementation began with faculty development. Starting January 2026, each instructor will be supported by an AI teaching assistant designed to update course content, refresh examples, assist with assessments, generate rubrics, suggest questions, track learning behaviours, and provide timely feedback. Early pilots showed that routine academic tasks such as formatting, uploading materials, and basic grading were reduced about 90%, significantly improving instructional efficiency.

To ensure responsible use, HBMSU established a set of guardrails, including weekly cross-functional reviews involving academic, legal, and student representatives; strict retention of sensitive data within institutional systems; mandatory human oversight for all high-stakes assessment decisions; and transparent disclosure of AI use by both faculty and leadership. The university further supported adoption through micro-clinics, opt-in pilots, rapid-response support channels, and structured peer exchange. Importantly, learners were engaged as co-designers, contributing to the refinement of rubrics and the improvement of AI prompts, strengthening feedback loops and ensuring that the technology truly serves their learning needs.

Prof. HUANG Ronghuai, Co-Dean of Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University, UNESCO Chair on AI in Education, China

How has AI begun to influence the way research is conducted at the Smart Learning Institute? What are three key areas of research that will support effective and responsible use of AI? How can AI promote smart education that is human centred and inclusive?

Key message: *AI-enabled education must be context-sensitive, ecosystem-driven, and pedagogically grounded.*

Prof. Huang emphasized that the question "Shaping AI or Being Shaped by AI" cannot be addressed without grounding discussions in pedagogy and learning science. At the Smart Learning Institute of Beijing Normal University, research focuses on smart learning environments, examining how students learn in the AI era and how pedagogy and educational planning must adapt accordingly.

He highlighted that educational models must be context-sensitive. Learning needs in urban centres differ from those in remote or mountainous regions; therefore, AI-enabled education cannot be uniform. Instead, approaches must be developed case by case, reflecting local conditions, cultures, and resources. He stressed that smart education should be understood as a holistic ecosystem, shaped by the characteristics of each context. He underscored the role of the Global Smart Education Network (GSENet) in creating a platform for institutions to share diverse experiences—from online to physical environments, from well-resourced areas to geographically isolated communities. He concluded that expanding this community of practice is essential to ensuring that AI supports inclusive, contextually appropriate, and locally meaningful models of smart education.

Ms. Torunn Gjelsvik, Secretary General, International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE), Norway

ICDE serves a diverse and globally distributed membership, from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts. How can we ensure that AI in education respects and supports this diversity, rather than homogenizing it? How can institutions address the equity and ethical dimensions of AI use?

Key message: *Protect diversity, listen to global voices, and use AI to support and not substitute human effort.*

Ms. Torunn Gjelsvik underscored that ICDE's membership, which spanning over 90 countries, reflects a rich diversity that must be protected as AI becomes embedded in education. She emphasized that AI systems risk homogenizing learning if diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic perspectives are not actively included. Drawing on the metaphor of a choir, she noted that effective systems must allow individual voices to be heard while contributing to a shared whole. Although global collaboration is essential, she observed that time constraints often limit meaningful engagement. Leaders must therefore recognize the value of creating space for dialogue, as listening to diverse perspectives strengthens institutional decision-making and helps address the biases and inequities present in AI systems. Her message reinforced that safeguarding diversity in the AI era requires intentional, human-centred leadership.

2. Second Round: Our Leadership

Prof. Asha Singh Kanwar opened the second round by reflecting on institutional readiness amid rapid technological disruption. She recounted an anecdote from the early days of IGNOU, in which a UK Vice-Chancellor explained that his ability to read the newspaper at 10 a.m. reflected how fully the institution had "domesticated" its systems, tools served the university, not the reverse. Prof. Asha used this example to ask how today's institutions might similarly domesticate AI, ensuring it becomes a catalyst for strengthening teaching, learning, assessment, and governance. She noted that while earlier leaders operated within stable and predictable environments, AI introduces profound uncertainty and demands new forms of leadership grounded in adaptability, ethical judgement, digital fluency, and human-centred values. She posed a core question:

How do leaders 'domesticate' AI so that institutions shape technology rather than be shaped by it? She invited the panelists to share how AI is reshaping their own leadership roles and what capacities are essential for navigating an increasingly AI-enabled future.

Dr. Mansoor Alawar reflected on how AI has reshaped his own leadership practice and what this implies for institutions. He emphasized that passion for improvement remains the driving force behind effective leadership, regardless of technological change. However, AI has required a fundamental shift in approach, for example, long approval cycles have given way to rapid 30-day pilots, enabling the university to test, refine, and scale innovations far more quickly. This shift has compelled leaders to focus on three dimensions often overlooked in the past, for example, faculty time, learner safety, and the speed of feedback, all of which directly affect educational quality. He noted that AI has pushed institutions to move from policy on paper to policy in action, prompting HBMSU to publish clear examples of appropriate AI use, model transparency in disclosure, and provide practical guidance to faculty and students. Leadership has also shifted from one-off checks to regular review cycles, with monthly assessments of AI tools to detect bias, address complaints, and deactivate features when necessary. Through these practices, AI has transformed institutional leadership into a more agile, iterative, and transparent process.

Mr. Maxim Jean-Louis indicated that his leadership approach to AI integration has been grounded in what he called "chaos adoption", a deliberate choice to avoid rigid frameworks, mandatory training, or prescriptive guidelines. Instead, he encouraged his team to experiment, observe outcomes, and share what they learned, fostering a culture of openness and collective discovery. He emphasized that institutions and even individual educators now have the capacity to build their own AI systems, enabling them to retain control over their data, safeguard privacy, and enhance accuracy. For him, the highest form of "domesticated AI" is not simply using external tools, but creating institutionally governed AI that reflects educational values and local priorities.

Prof. Huang Ronghuai highlighted the ongoing work under the UNESCO Chair on AI in Education examining how leading universities integrate AI across research, teaching, learning, and administration. He noted that the most significant investments internationally are concentrated in AI for scientific research, including engineering, medicine, and drug discovery, with institutions such as MIT, Harvard, and Peking University using AI to accelerate innovation and better prepare future leaders. He also shared a recent classroom study in China, where AI-supported tools were used to scaffold writing for lower-secondary students. Teachers provided key words and themes, and students used language models to generate ideas and refine drafts step by step. While the results showed promise, he emphasized the need for careful pedagogical design, cautioning against overreliance on AI for evaluation or idea generation. The role of the teacher, he stressed, remains essential in guiding students to think critically and "stay human." Prof. Huang concluded that as AI becomes more deeply embedded in classrooms and universities, sustaining human agency and pedagogical integrity must remain core priorities.

Ms. Torunn Gjelsvik noted that leading a small Secretariat offers certain advantages in adopting AI, as the organization can experiment flexibly without navigating large-scale institutional policies. ICDE has embraced a form of "chaos adoption," testing AI tools to improve knowledge search, writing, and other repetitive tasks, enabling the team to work more efficiently despite limited resources. At the same time, she highlighted emerging dilemmas, particularly the environmental costs associated with AI's intensive consumption of water and electricity. What benefits a small organisation operationally may not be sustainable at a global level. She stressed that leaders must therefore develop the judgement to determine when AI genuinely supports work and when its use should be limited. In her view, AI should augment—not substitute—human contribution, and responsible leadership requires thoughtful reflection on its appropriate use across different contexts.

3. Third Round: The Road Ahead

Prof. Asha Singh Kanwar noted that AI is already reshaping learning behaviors, with learners turning to generative AI applications and virtual assistants for just-in-time, self-directed, and self-determined learning. This shift raises important questions about how universities will institutionalize heutagogy, align it with established pedagogical models, and adapt existing assessment and credentialing systems to recognize new forms of autonomous, AI-supported learning. Acknowledging that this represents only one facet of the broader transformation underway, she invited each panelist to

offer a single key insight or message to guide participants and global leaders as they prepare for an increasingly AI-enabled future.

Ms. Torunn Gjelsvik emphasized that educators and institutions must continue to act as creators of knowledge. She also highlighted the sustainability implications of AI, recalling the conclusions of ICDE's Ethical Leadership Summit in Geneva, which likened AI to "a charging elephant" that demands coordinated and collective action. No single institution or country can confront these challenges alone; ensuring that AI in education remains inclusive and sustainable will require global collaboration and shared wisdom.

Mr. Maxim Jean-Louis highlighted the accelerating pace of technological adoption, noting that AI is spreading with the ubiquity and force of electricity. He emphasized that experimentation is already underway across classrooms and institutions, and that continuous sharing of practices and insights will be essential as the sector moves into uncharted territory.

Prof. Huang Ronghuai focused on learners, stressing that future readiness will depend on students' ability to collect, connect, and create knowledge with AI while maintaining curiosity, creativity, and core human capacities. He highlighted that AI should amplify, but not replace the learner's role in meaning-making.

Dr. Mansoor Alawar offered both short-term and long-term guidance. In the immediate term, he advised institutions to begin with faculty, protect learners, and establish simple, transparent rules that build trust. AI use should be open and responsible, supported by human oversight and clear expectations. Looking ahead, he argued that AI will accelerate long-anticipated shifts toward personalized and just-in-time learning, fundamentally reshaping higher education. The focus will shift from schooling to learning as a universal, lifelong process, enabling millions who have been excluded from traditional systems to access new opportunities.

4. Q&A

A doctoral student from Athabasca University asked how universities might better recognize and leverage "grassroots" leaders, which means AI-engaged educators who influence peers through experimentation and shared practice but do not hold formal leadership roles.

Responding to the question, Mr. Maxim Jean-Louis encouraged institutions to protect curiosity and create space for individuals at all levels to explore and innovate.

Prof. Huang Ronghuai echoed this view, emphasizing that leadership in the AI era must be distributed, with every educator empowered to guide change and contribute to institutional learning.

Dr. Mansoor Alawar added that discussions about leadership must also incorporate the perspectives of learners themselves. He suggested that future ICDE dialogues must include 'GenZ' and the emerging 'Alpha generation", noting that young people already envision and practise forms of

learning that differ from traditional models, and their expectations and experiences are essential to shaping future-ready institutions.

II. Key Takeaways

1. **Human-Centred AI** – AI must remain grounded in human values, human dignity, professional responsibility and social justice.
2. **Equity and Inclusion** – Widening digital and AI divides, alongside structural biases in algorithms, require deliberate strategies to ensure fair and inclusive use of AI in education.
3. **Contextualised Implementation** – AI-enabled education cannot be uniform. effective adoption must be tailored to local cultures, needs, and learning environments.
4. **Responsible Domestication of AI** – Institutions must "domesticate" AI through clear stages, including access, adoption, integration, and responsible use. So that AI serves educational purposes rather than dictates them.
5. **Simplicity, Transparency, and Trust** – Clear rules, simple processes, and transparent disclosures build trust among faculty and learners and support responsible AI adoption.
6. **Distributed and Collaborative Leadership** – Leadership in the AI era must be shared. Educators, students, and informal leaders all contribute to shaping institutional practice.
7. **Experimentation and Experience Sharing** – Rapid piloting, open experimentation, and continuous sharing of practices are essential as institutions navigate AI's fast-evolving landscape.
8. **Pedagogical Integrity and Learning Science** – AI must reinforce but not replace pedagogy. Teachers remain essential for guiding critical thinking, creativity, and "staying human."
9. **Personalised and Lifelong Learning** – AI will accelerate shifts toward personalised, just-in-time, and lifelong learning, expanding access for populations previously excluded from traditional systems.
10. **Sustainability and Global Cooperation** – The environmental and ethical implications of AI demand global collaboration, shared wisdom, and coordinated action beyond any single institution or country.

The Fireside Chat reaffirmed that the transformative potential of artificial intelligence in education can only be realised through governance that is deliberate, ethically informed and genuinely inclusive. Although AI offers significant opportunities to expand educational access, improve learning quality and strengthen institutional capacity, these benefits are neither automatic nor assured. The degree to which AI will advance or undermine equity, cultural and linguistic diversity, and sustainable development will depend on the strategic choices made by institutions, policymakers and educators. As AI is rapidly integrated into educational systems, we should ensure that AI is responsibly 'domesticated', empowers learners, safeguards ecological resources, and supports inclusive and lifelong learning pathways. Only through such collective, reflective and principled engagement can AI function as a catalyst for equitable, high-quality and sustainable education.